

## New Lads or Ladettes? A Critique of Current Theoretical Explanations for Young Women's Violence Proliferated over Social Media

### New Lads or Ladettes? A Critique of Current Theoretical Explanations for Young Women's Violence Proliferated over Social Media

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#### **Abstract**

Current theoretical explanations for young women's violence examine physical violence as a masculine behaviour. This means that young women are constructed as rejecting elements of their femininity in favour of masculine behaviours in order to perform violence in an acceptable way, which results in them being constructed as violent femmes, new lads or ladettes. Alternatively, theoretical explanations construct young women as adhering to a feminine gender performance when avoiding physical violence, or engaging what are traditionally considered to be feminine characteristics of aggression. This paper critiques existing theoretical approaches applied to young women's violence, by drawing on empirical research that examined young women's physical altercations proliferated through social media. Preliminary research findings illustrate how continuing to construct young women's violence through a gendered paradigm offers inadequate explanations for what young women's violence actually entails. It concludes by suggesting how young women's violence may be more adequately explained using a theoretical framework of embodying gender that moves away from gender dichotomies and constructs violence as a series of bodily practices.

#### **Introduction**

Young women's violence is not a new phenomenon. However, since young women's engagement in violence was first acknowledged by criminological scholarship, it has been explained through a masculinist paradigm. This means that physical violence is constructed as a behaviour that forms part of accepted masculine performances of gender and is intertwined with hegemonic masculinity. Young men can perform violence as a way of establishing their masculine identity, yet conversely such physical violence is depicted as an unacceptable behaviour for young women to engage in. This paper draws on empirical research consisting of structured observation and thematic analysis of 60 online videos featuring physical altercations between young women uploaded to five social media platforms. The research aimed to critique current theoretical explanations for young women's violence. Analysis of both the content of the online videos, themselves, as well as the comments posted by the online viewers allows this paper to begin to show how existing theoretical works do not offer adequate explanations for what young women's violence actually entails. This paper does this firstly by illustrating how young women's violence is contextualised in existing criminological literature. Second, it outlines the approach taken by both traditional and feminist theoretical frameworks. Third, it sets out the methodological framework that underpins the research data. Fourth, the research data is used to critique existing theoretical approaches and demonstrate how they may offer limited explanations for young women's violence. Finally, this paper begins to show how a new theoretical framework of embodying gender is needed to more fully account for young women's violence away from this dichotomous gendered construction. It suggests that this could be done by reconceptualising violence as a series of bodily practices.

### **Gendered explanations for young women's violence**

Criminological scholarship examines young women's violence in a gendered way, by intertwining physical violence with the current construct of hegemonic masculinity (Chesney-Lind 1997; Chesney-Lind and Shelden 1992). Hegemonic masculinity is a socially fluid concept that dictates the scope of accepted masculine performance that all men should engage in to establish their masculine gender identity (Tomsen 1998, 2008). Men are able to use violence to demonstrate their engagement in this masculine ideal, which requires men to display behaviours such as being dominant, assertive, and aggressive (Connell 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). However, young men's violence is also constructed from a gender neutral position in that men's violence is not considered to be a gendered issue, and it is taken for granted that violence is a masculine behaviour (Campbell 1993; Gilbert 2002). As a result, literature examining young men's violence focuses on their engagement in violence itself, which has caused men's engagement in violence to go unquestioned (Salter and Tomsen 2012; Tomsen 2008).

Constructing violence in this way has negatively impacted on how young women's violence is conceptualised. Intertwining young men's violence with the construct of hegemonic masculinity means that violence has yet to be conceptualised as part of an accepted hegemonic feminine gender performance. Currently hegemonic femininity requires young women to be quiet, passive and demure (Jones 2008; Jones and Flores 2012; Wesley 2006). As a result, no theories of feminine violence have moved beyond conceptualising violent young women in masculine terms (Connell 1999; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Lorber 1994). This has contributed to young women's engagement in violence being perceived as uncharacteristic or aberrant and for violent young women to be constructed as violent femmes, new lads or ladettes (Batchelor 2011; Miller 2001; Sharpe 2012). As a result those young women who engage in violence are seen as worse than their male counterparts. This is because not only are young women being physically violent, but they are also rejecting behaviours associated with socially accepted performances of femininity in order to do so (Carrington 2013; Batchelor 2011; Miller 2001).

### **Masculine constructions of violence and criminological theories**

Constructing young women's violence in masculine terms is reinforced by both traditional and feminist criminological theories. Traditional theories were written by men, to apply to the experiences of men and, therefore, provide limited or distorted views of the experiences of women (Chesney-Lind and Shelden 1992). This was because statistically young men commit the vast majority of criminal offences, which rendered young women's engagement in crime and violence not significant enough to warrant consideration by traditional theories (Boots and Wareham 2012). In addition to only providing limited consideration for women's experiences, traditional criminologies were constructed as gender neutral. It was assumed traditional theories were equally applicable to men's and women's offending behaviours — despite providing very limited consideration for women's experiences (Chesney-Lind and Shelden 1992; Chesney-Lind, Morash and Stevens 2008). Additionally, traditional criminologies considered crime to be an abnormal behaviour for women to engage in. This can be clearly illustrated by drawing on the works of Lombroso (see Baez 2010) who focussed on the biological nature of crime and deviance. While his work provided some limited consideration for criminal women, he argued that women who engaged in crime were 'underdeveloped men' and emphasised the fact that women who engaged in crime were abnormal (Baez 2010: 564). Lombroso theorised that 'normal' women focussed on looking after children and respecting their husbands, while criminal women were: sexually and morally deviant, lacked modesty, brazen, and lived an irregular life (Baez 2010: 564). These examples demonstrate how women's engagement in crime and violence has traditionally been constructed through a masculine lens, and is considered an anomalous behaviour for women to engage in (Abramson and Modzelewski 2011).

The assumption that traditional criminologies were applicable to female criminality was criticised by emerging feminist criminologies which developed around the time of women's liberation (Daly and Chesney-Lind 1988). This marked the first time that the uniquely gendered experiences of women were considered separately from the experiences of men (Daly and Chesney-Lind 1988). However, in spite of this, feminist theories continue to examine young women's engagement in violence through gender dichotomies and construct young women's violence as an anomalous or aberrant behaviour. This can be best illustrated by examining four feminist theories. These are: the sexualisation thesis, the sisters in crime thesis, structural opportunity theories, and the ladette thesis. While each of these theories moves beyond the approach taken by traditional criminologies, all four continue to adhere to gendered constructions of violence and examine young women's violence using masculine terms.

The sexualisation thesis does not specifically look at young women's engagement in violence, as it was written to explain why official crime statistics show that young women offend at a much lesser rate in comparison to their male counterparts (Carrington 2013; Chesney-Lind 1997). This theory developed prior to the separation of the child welfare and juvenile justice systems and theorised that young women were more likely to be policed through welfare systems. This meant the focus was on young women's welfare needs even when they had committed a criminal offence (Carrington 2013; Chesney-Lind 1997). The sexualisation thesis shows how young women were held to a different set of behavioural standards in comparison to young men. This resulted in young women being processed through welfare systems for failing to adhere to accepted performances of femininity, by doing things like: engaging in violence; being sexually promiscuous; being uncontrollable; or for running away, even when they had committed a criminal offence. As these were welfare offences, this resulted in young women's transgressions failing to appear in official crime data. Further, these offences were rarely, if ever applied to young men, who were policed through criminal justice systems when they committed a criminal offence (Chesney-Lind 1997; Chesney-Lind and Shelden 1992). However, most importantly, the sexualisation thesis illustrates how young men's engagement in these behaviours was not considered a welfare issue, but rather seen as a normal or natural part of being masculine (Carrington 1993, 1996). Young women engaging in violence on the other hand was an issue that required state intervention as young women were seen as transgressing feminine gender norms to engage in violent behaviour (Carrington 1993, 1996).

In contrast, the sisters in crime thesis (Adler 1975), structural opportunity theories (Simon 1975), and the ladette thesis (Carrington 2013; Sharpe 2012) all specifically relate to young women's engagement in violence. The sisters in crime thesis and structural opportunity theories were written around the time of women's liberation and both theorised that as women gained increased social and structural opportunities that were more equal to their male counterparts, their engagement in crime and violence would also become more equal (Adler 1975; Simon 1975). However, in making this argument each of these theories fail to move beyond the gendered constructions of violence, as their central premise is that the increased social and structural opportunities that were afforded to women by women's liberation (including engagement in crime and violence) was due to the masculinisation of feminine behaviour. That is, women were being afforded the opportunity to reject traditional feminine gender norms and engage in behaviour traditionally defined as masculine, which caused their engagement in crime and violence to increase (Batchelor 2011; Chesney-Lind 1997; Daly and Chesney-Lind 1988). As a result, these theories continue to construct violence in masculine terms and consider young women's engagement in violence to be uncharacteristic and unfeminine.

The ladette thesis (Carrington 2013; Sharpe 2012) takes this approach one step further and argues that young women are now actively choosing to reject traditional feminine behaviours in favour of masculine ones which has resulted in them being defined, or defining themselves, as new lads or ladettes (Carrington 2013; Sharpe 2012). The ladette thesis also emphasised the increased public attention being given to the issue of

young women's violence. This has resulted in the ladette thesis being described as the new sexualisation thesis, as it illustrates how the focus has shifted away from young women's sexual or moral transgressions, and towards their engagement in physical violence (Carrington 1993). The ladette thesis shows how the issue of young women transgressing heteronormative gender norms is still the subject of social panic, as young women are depicted as actively rejecting traditional feminine gender behaviours to engage in violence — as currently women cannot be simultaneously constructed as both violent and feminine (Batchelor 2011; Carrington 2013; Sharpe 2012). Each of these theories illustrate that while the introduction of feminist criminologies enabled criminological theories to allow for the consideration of the experiences of women, young women's engagement in physical violence has yet to be conceptualised away from masculine gender ideals. Empirical research has begun to illustrate how continuing to examine young women's violence in this manner has resulted in this issue being inadequately understood.

### **Methodological framework**

This paper draws on the results of an empirical research project that aimed to examine: what young women's violence proliferated over social media looked like, which performances of violence were encouraged and rewarded in the online context, and how young women performed gender when engaging in physically violent behaviour. In order to do this, structured observation and thematic analysis of 60 fight videos, which had been uploaded to five social media platforms between January 2012 and July 2013, was conducted (Larkin and Dwyer 2016). Fight sites or social media platforms were defined as web based applications that produce user-generated content, shared by communities based on mutual interest (Bluett-Boyd, Fileborn, Quadara et al 2013: 88). Both the fight sites and videos used in this project were selected using a purposive sampling method (Champion 2006; Hagen 2010). The fight sites were selected on the basis that they allowed the online viewers to post comments to each specific fight video and more than 10 fight videos had been uploaded to each of the sites during the selected timeframe. The timeframe was chosen to ensure the most up to date videos formed part of the sample.

The fight videos themselves were selected according to the presence of key words in the titles or comments, such as: chicks, chick-fight, street fight, brutal, extreme fight, and insane girl fight. The content of the videos, as well as the comments posted to each video by online viewers, were analysed as research data. The content of each fight video was analysed according to predetermined characteristics on a coding schedule, which involved the collection of both qualitative and quantitative variables. These included: the number and ratio of the fight participants, what the fight participants were wearing, and where the fight took place (Given 2008; Martinko and Gardner 1985, 1990). The verbal comments made in the fight video, as well as the comments posted to each fight video by the online viewers comprised qualitative data was collected. Both the qualitative and quantitative data were sorted into key themes and thematically analysed. This approach allowed this project to draw detailed conclusions regarding what young women's violence looks like and how young women performed gender when engaging in violence proliferated online. More importantly, this research has begun to demonstrate how the existing theoretical frameworks are inadequate for considering what young women's violence actually entails.

### **Critique of existing theoretical approaches**

In contrast to arguments made in literature and criminological theories, young women in the sampled fight videos were not rejecting a feminine performance of gender in favour of a masculine one in order to engage in violence underpinned by masculine characteristics of aggression, such as punching, kicking, or wrestling (Batchelor 2011; Jones 2009; Mullins and Miller 2008). Nor were young women adhering to a traditional feminine gender performance and either avoiding physical violence altogether, or engaging in feminine characteristics of aggression, such as relational aggression, scratching, or slapping (Miller 2002; Jones 2008; Jones and Flores 2012). These characteristics are considered to be typically feminine, especially relational

aggression as it centres around verbal abuse and manipulation (Henriksen and Miller 2012). Engaging in a feminine performance of gender means that the young women continued to present themselves in a stereotypically feminine way by wearing feminine clothing, such as dresses, skirts and jewellery, and incorporated elements of relational aggression into their physical altercations (Larkin and Dwyer 2016). This can be contrasted with engaging in a masculine gender performance where young women try to disguise their femininity and present themselves in a stereotypically masculine way or consider themselves to be masculine when engaging in violence (Miller 2001, 2002).

The young women in the videos studied appeared to blur gender dichotomies, and continued to present themselves in a stereotypically feminine way, while engaging in physical violence that is traditionally seen as brutal and masculine acts of aggression (Larkin and Dwyer 2016). Further to this, there was an expectation by the fight participants, audience to the altercation and the online viewers that the physical altercations be carried out in this manner. This was illustrated in a number of ways. For example, the online viewers would post comments to encourage the use of brutal and masculine fighting techniques and post comments saying: 'that girl knows[s] how to fight ...'; 'Damn ... She destroyed her face'; 'Why are these females so strong now ... they hit like dudes now' (Larkin and Dwyer 2016). Similar comments were also made by the audience to the altercation who would yell things like: 'Hit her!', 'Beat her ass!', 'Get her to the ground!', while the altercation was occurring (Larkin and Dwyer 2016). The need for the young women to engage in brutal and masculine characteristics of aggression while also maintaining a feminine performance of gender was most succinctly demonstrated by a comment posted by one online viewer who stated: 'word of advice while fighting: look like a lady, fight like a man' (Larkin and Dwyer 2016). This preliminary data begins to illustrate how young women are not rejecting feminine gender behaviours in favour of masculine behaviours in order to engage in violence in an acceptable way, which demonstrates the limited understandings for young women's violence offered by existing theories.

### **Concluding thoughts**

This paper has drawn on empirical research that examined the proliferation of young women's violence over social media to challenge the explanations given to young women's violence by both traditional and feminist criminological theories. The basis for this critique is that existing theoretical frameworks continue to intertwine accepted performances of violence around accepted performances of masculinity. Currently, the only way that young women might perform violence according to mainstream perspectives is to be constructed as a masculine 'lad', as violence continues to be depicted as an aberrant behaviour for young women. However, the proliferation of violence over social media has provided insight into what young women's physical altercations actually look like. This research has demonstrated that, in contrast to existing theories, young women may not be rejecting feminine gender behaviours in favour of masculine behaviours in order to perform violence in an acceptable way. As a result, there is a need to develop a new conceptual framework of embodying gender that constructs violence away from gender dichotomies and reconceptualises these interactions.

What might a reconceptualisation of young women's violence look like? How might we rethink young women who fight so they are no longer sensationalised as the new 'lads'? One way this might be done is to think about violence as a practice involving young people's bodies, made up of a set of micro practices that are not necessarily gendered. Taking this approach makes it possible to think about violence outside of gender dichotomies, as performing gender becomes just one factor that may contribute to how bodies perform violence. This allows violence to be reconceptualised as a behaviour that the body performs, rather than being constructed as an inherently masculine gendered practice. Not only might reconceptualising violence away from masculine gender behaviours allow criminological theories to provide more adequate consideration for what young women's violence actually entails, it may also allow for this issue to be more adequately understood, responded to and prevented.



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